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Soviets Reported Pushing Laser Arms

Growing Arsenal Outlined in Annual Pentagon Report

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The Soviet Union is developing an arsenal of lasers that, within the next decade, could do virtually everything from blasting incoming missiles to burning holes in attacking bombers or blinding their pilots, the Defense Department reported yesterday.

This portrait is drawn in the new edition of "Soviet Military Power," released by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger in an electronic

extravaganza. His remarks were televised directly from the Pentagon studio to the United States, Japan, Belgium and West Germany.

"The forces of the U.S.S.R. and its allies continue to expand, modernize and deploy with increasingly capable weapons designed for the entire spectrum of strategic, theater nuclear and conventional conflict," Weinberger said in releasing the 143-page report.

The Pentagon has ordered publication of 398,000 copies, 54,000 more than last year's edition.

The section on Soviet missile-defense work becomes public as President Reagan and Weinberger are trying to persuade political leaders and citizens in this country and abroad that Reagan's missile-defense effort is worth pursuing.

Called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) officially and "Star Wars" informally, it is designed to help stabilize, rather than upset, the balance of nuclear terror between the United States and Soviet Union.

Asked at a brief news conference why he believes that an effective missile defense would be stabilizing in U.S. hands but destabilizing if the Soviets perfected it first, Weinberger replied:

"Because of the difference in [political] systems, because of the difference in usage, because of the way they have behaved in the past

and because of their obvious world ambitions. We had a total monopoly on nuclear weapons for many years and did not use it. I cannot imagine the reverse of the situation."

Weinberger said the Soviets are criticizing the U.S. initiative because "they clearly want a monopoly in this field. They are doing it themselves, and they want to be left alone to do it."

The new report advances last year's Pentagon estimate of when the Soviets could begin deploying operational lasers on the ground to stop incoming ballistic missiles. "Not likely in this century," the 1984 edition said.

The 1985 report repeats the words "not likely" but adds that "with high priority and some significant risk of failure, the Soviets could skip some testing steps and be ready to deploy a ground-based laser BMD [ballistic-missile defense] by the early- to mid-1990s."

The Soviets could deploy lasers powerful enough to penetrate the skin of airplanes or to blind their pilots as early as "the late 1980s," according to this year's report.

The Pentagon predicts that initial deployment of these anti-aircraft lasers, which presumably would also be used against cruise missiles, would be around such valued facilities as strategic missile bases.

Soviet ships will not receive anti-aircraft lasers "until after the end of the decade," the report predicts. "Theater forces"—troops and weaponry, including medium- and short-range missiles that operate in one region—would have operational lasers "some time sooner."

The lasers "are likely to be capable of structurally damaging aircraft at close ranges and producing electro-optical and eye damage at greater distances," according to the Pentagon.

The Soviets also are expected to take lasers aloft "in the early 1990s" to be ready to attack satellites and cruise missiles and protect Soviet satellites, according to the report.

The Pentagon said the Soviets' high-energy laser program dates to the mid-1960s and "is much larger than the U.S. effort. They have built over a half dozen major research and development facilities and test ranges, and they have over 10,000 scientists and engineers associated with laser development."

The United States also has undertaken a broad effort to explore military potential of various types of lasers. The report did not compare rival programs.

In other areas, the report made few new disclosures. It did say the Soviets have built a new nuclear-powered attack submarine, the Akula, now undergoing sea trials and said to be slightly bigger than Los Angeles-class attack submarines deployed by the United States.

The report cites many examples of Soviet copying of U.S. weapons, underscoring the action-reaction phenomenon as the two superpowers try to match weaponry.

The Soviets have built versions of the Air Force F15 fighter, the airborne warning and control radar plane, the Navy F14 fighter and Trident missile submarine and the space shuttle, the report said.

The report, gathered by the Defense Intelligence Agency in coordination with other intelligence-gathering organizations, said the Soviets have a sophisticated network for obtaining western computers, electronics and other technology.

"The turnaround time for the receipt of the desired design information or hardware can be a matter of weeks," the report said.